DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 081 PS 021 326

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TITLE Children's Moods as Organizers of Response Patterns to Interadult Conflict.
SPONS AGENCY Sigma XI, The Scientific Research Society.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (New Orleans, LA, March 25-28, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Behavior; *Childhood Attitudes; *Conflict; Early Childhood Education; *Emotional Response; *Interpersonal Competence; *Moods; Psychotherapy; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS Emotional Distress

ABSTRACT

This study examined how children's emotions affect their responses to adult conflict. A total of 64 children aged 4 through 8 heard a simulated interadult conflict in the next room after they were induced to feel angry, sad, happy, or "just O.K." Assessments of children's affect, cognitions, and behaviors consistently revealed that children in sad and angry moods exhibited the most sensitivity, behavioral dysregulation, and distress in response to the adult conflict. Positive emotional arousal, on the other hand, had a protective effect on certain dimensions of children's functioning during adult discord. Findings are discussed as support for the idea that negative emotional arousal and dysregulation are contributing mechanisms in the relationship between angry environments and child psychotherapy. (Author/MDM)

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Children's Moods as Organizers of Response Patterns to Interadult Conflict

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Acknowledgments: This research was supported by a Sigma Xi grant awarded to Patrick Davies. We would like to thank Mark Cummings for his substantial contributions to many aspects of this study and Judy Raese, Jennifer Shibley, Ellen McBride, Staci Heindel, Heather Roberts, and Steve Krieder for their assistance in data collection.

Running Head: CHILDREN'S MOODS AND THEIR RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

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Abstract

The present study investigated how children's emotions affect their responses to adult conflict. Sixty-four children, 4-8 years of age, heard a simulated interadult conflict in the next room after they were induced to feel either angry, sad, happy, or "just okay". Assessments of children's affect, cognitions, and behaviors consistently revealed that children in sad and angry moods exhibited the most sensitivity, behavioral dysregulation, and distress in response to the adult conflict. Findings are discussed as support for the notion that negative emotional arousal and dysregulation are contributing mechanisms in the relation between angry environments and child psychopathology.

Introduction

Empirical links between child psychological problems and exposure to discord and anger are well documented (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Conceptual explanations have implicated children's emotional arousal as a key mechanism contributing to the vulnerability of children exposed to high levels of discord. For example, heightened emotional arousal may lead to psychological problems by intensifying children's negative expressions and lowering their threshold for behavioral and emotional dysregulation (Cummings & Davies, in press; Cummings & Zahn-Waxler, 1992).

While there is little disagreement that emotion is an important organizer of children's functioning in angry environments, controversy still exists with regard to the precise effects of emotional arousal on child functioning. Some conceptual models have posited that different emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness) promote increased negative responding under stressful social situations in similar, nonspecific ways (e.g., Zillman, 1983). Other models, in contrast, have proposed that different emotions may have different effects on children who witness discord. For example, Grych & Fincham (1990) hypothesized that children's negative emotions will predispose them to attend to and remember negative characteristics of interadult conflict thereby placing them at heightened risk for responding more negatively to conflict. Positive affect, on the other hand, was conceptualized as a buffer that serves to reduce the stressful effects of discord on children.

The impact of emotions may extend beyond immediate perceptions and behavioral responses to shape children's attributions, coping strategies, memories, and

expectations of future adult realtions (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Cummings and colleagues, who have argued that affect is an important element in the relationship between interadult conflict and children's coping styles (Cummings, 1987), have found evidence indicating that children's emotional responses to conflict serve as organizers of larger styles of coping that involve complex interrelations between social, emotional, cognitive, and physiological systems. This study is designed to investigate how specific types of emotional arousal may act as vulnerability factors or buffers for children who witness adult discord and anger.

Method

Subjects. Sixty-four 4-8 year-old children (32 boys, 32 girls) participated in the study.

Procedure. The children were randomly assigned to feel either angry, sad, happy, or "just okay" using a valid mood induction technique that involves asking them to think about an event that generates the appropriate affective state (Masters, Barden, & Ford, 1979). Next, the children heard a 90-second interadult conflict in the next room, which was actually a pre-recorded simulation between an actor and actress. Children's behavioral responses to the adult anger were videotaped behind a one-way mirror. The children were then interviewed 8 minutes after the conflict to assess their responses to conflict.

Measures. The child interview assessed: (1) children's perceptions of the angry adults' emotions, (2) their own feelings during the conflict, and (3) their expectancies about the quality of future relations between adults.

Videotapes of children's behavioral responses during and after the adult conflict

were divided into 15-second intervals. The presence or absence of 8 specific child behaviors were recorded for each 15-second interval. In order to reduce the number of statistical analyses, specific codes were then collapsed into two conceptually meaningful summary catagories: (1) distress - facial distress, crying, freezing, anger, verbal concern; (2) behavioral arousal- escape, physical and verbal aggression. Inter-observer reliability using Kappas ranged from .84 to 1.00 for the specific codes.

Strategy for Data Analysis

Children's self-report and behavioral responses were submitted to a series of three-way factorial ANOVAs, with factors including emotion condition (mad, sad, happy, neutral), sex (male, female), and age (older, younger). For the sake of brevity, only emotion condition main effects are reported. Significant emotion main effects are followed up by pairwise comparisons, using Tukey tests to control for family wise error.

Results

1. Validation of Mood Induction - As a check on the validity of the mood induction, children's mood inducing thoughts and facial expressions during the mood induction were rated independently by two judges for their degree of inherent anger, sadness, and happiness. Correlation coefficients examining interrater agreement ranged from .81 to .94 for emotion ratings of thoughts (all $ps < .0005$), and between .81 and .92 for emotion ratings of facial expressions (all $ps < .0005$). Emotion ratings of children's thoughts were found to vary as a function of mood induction condition for ratings of sadness $F(3,48) = 146.49$, $p < .0005$; anger $F(3,48) = 106.74$, $p < .0005$; and happiness, $F(3,48) = 93.08$, $p < .0005$. Children's facial expressions also varied as a function of

mood induction condition for ratings of happiness $F(3,48) = 8.55$, $p < .0005$; anger $F(3,48) = 2.45$, $p = .07$; and sadness $F(3,48) = 2.37$, $p = .08$. Planned comparisons revealed that children exhibited both thoughts (e.g., sad thoughts) and facial expressions (e.g., sad facial expressions) consistent with their mood condition (e.g., sad mood induction), thus demonstrating the validity of the mood induction. [SEE FIGURE 1.].

2. Children's Perceptions of Adults as Angry: Children's perceptions of the adult conflict varied as a function of their mood condition, $F(3,48) = 4.47$, $p < .01$. Sad children perceived the adults as more angry than neutral children ($p < .05$), while perceptions of happy and mad children fell between these two extremes. [SEE FIGURE 2.].

3. Children's Self-Reported Emotional Responses: Happy and neutral children reported roughly similar levels of positive and negative emotional responses to the conflict, while mad children reported feeling significantly more negative responses than positive responses. The sad affect group fell between children in the nonnegative and mad groups. [SEE FIGURE 3.].

4. Expectancies of Future Adult Relations: Type of affect induction experienced significantly influenced children's expectancies of distress, $F(3,48) = 2.83$, $p < .05$, and harmony $F(3,48) = 2.99$, $p < .05$ in future adult relations. Sad children expected that future relations between the adults would be significantly more distressed than neutral children and significantly less harmonious than happy children. Mad children fell between these two extremes. [SEE FIGURE 4.].

5. Behavioral Responses to Adult Conflict: Type of affect induction experienced

influenced children's distress responses, $F(3,48) = 6.51$, $p = .001$, and behavioral arousal, $F(3,48) = 2.82$, $p < .05$. Sad children were significantly more distressed than neutral and happy children. Mad children exhibited more behavioral arousal than neutral and happy children. [SEE FIGURE 5].

Conclusions

Results strongly support Grych & Fincham's (1990) predictions that differing emotions have differential effects on children's functioning in discordant environments. The fact that sad and angry children exhibited the most emotional distress, behavioral dysregulation, and negative perceptions when witnessing adult anger strongly implicates negative emotional arousal as a key mechanism that increases children's vulernability to adult discord. Positive emotional arousal, on the other hand, had a protective effect on certain dimensions of children's functioning during the adult discord. For example, happy children exhibited relatively low levels of distress and held more optimistic expectancies concerning the future adult relations. In contrast, no reliable evidence was found for the notion that emotional arousal, regardless of whether it is positive or negative in quality, leads to increased emotional distress and behavioral dysregulation.

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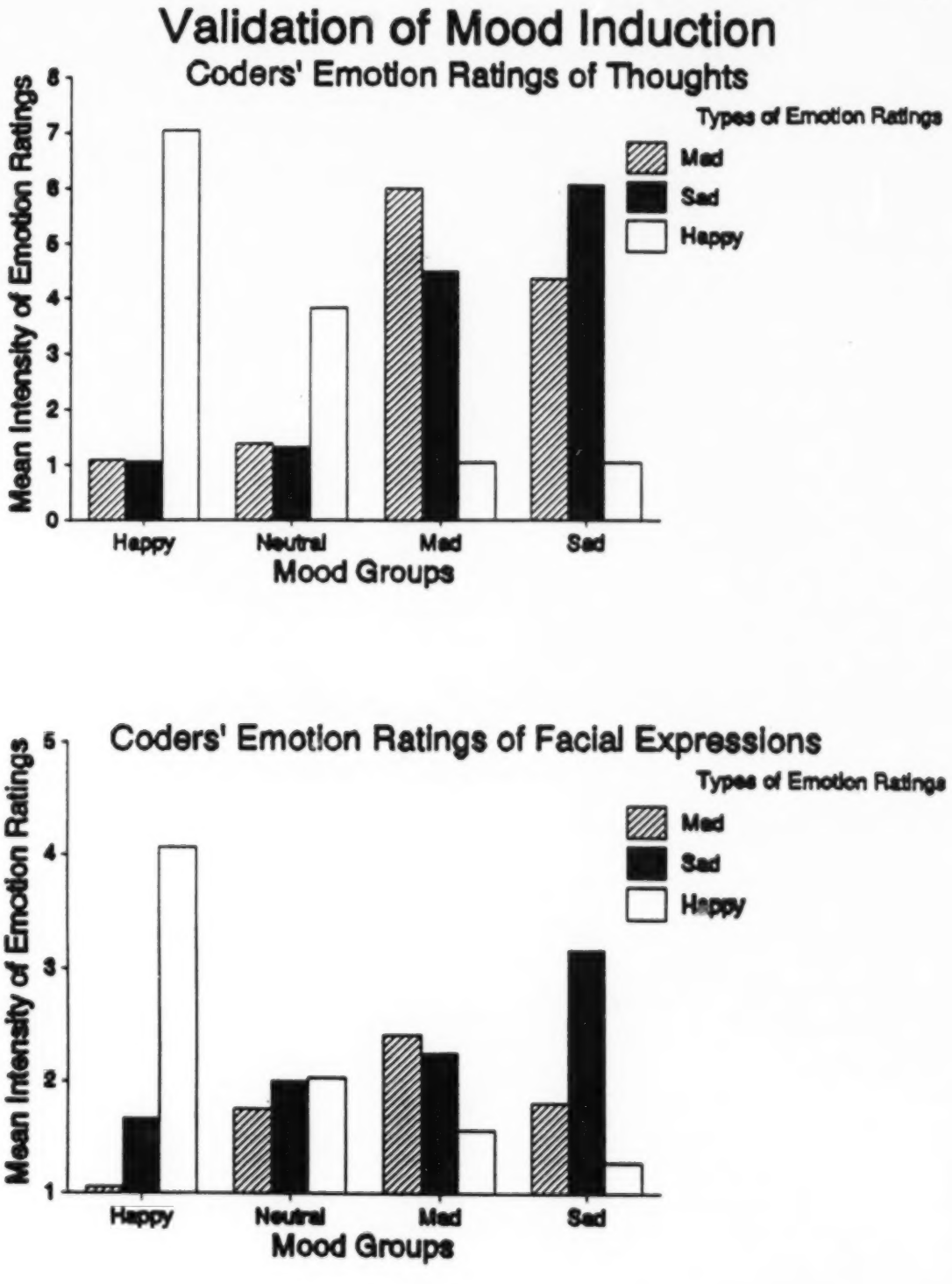
Figure 1.


Validation of Mood Induction
Coders' Emotion Ratings of Thoughts
Mean Intensity of Emotion Ratings
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
Happy
Neutral
Mad
Sad
Mood Groups
Types of Emotion Ratings
Mad
Sad
Happy
Coders' Emotion Ratings of Facial Expressions
Mean Intensity of Emotion Ratings
1
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Happy
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Mad
Sad
Mood Groups
Types of Emotion Ratings
Mad
Sad
Happy

Figure 2.

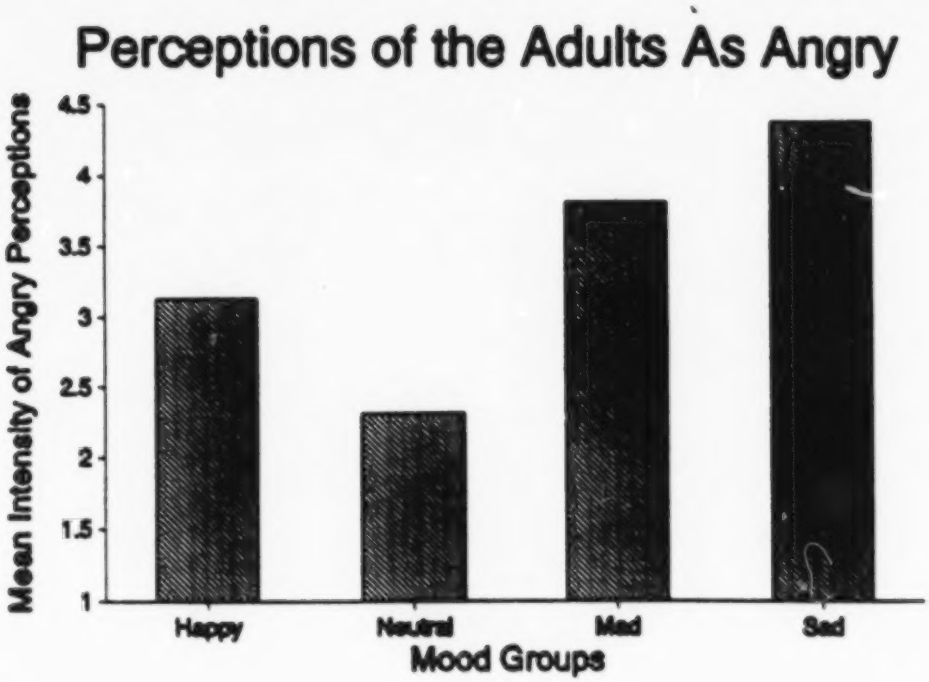

Figure 3.

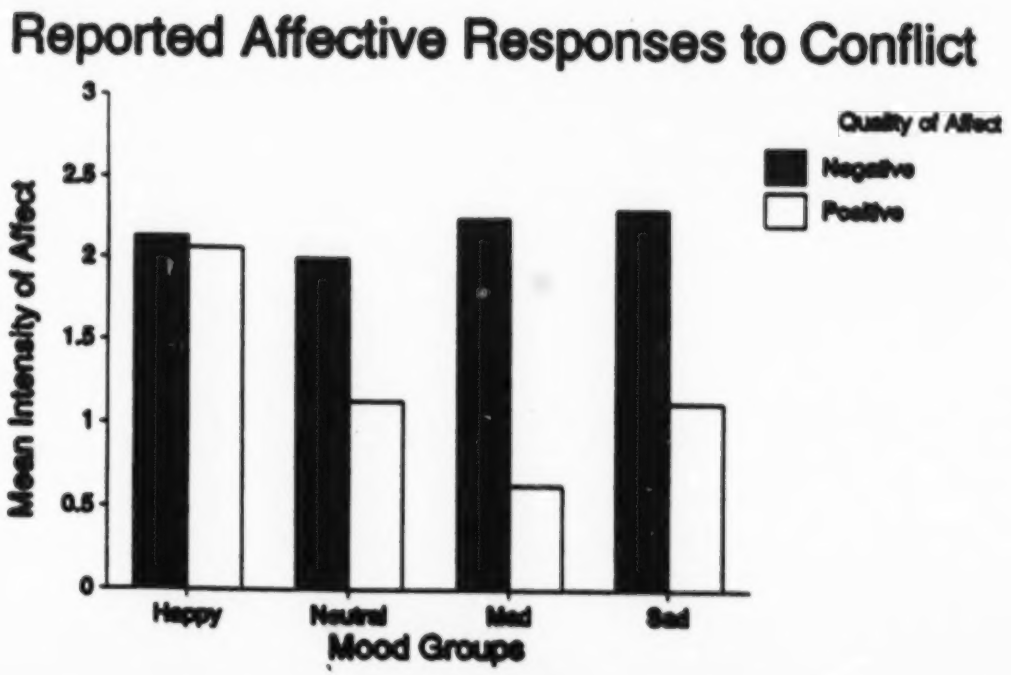

Figure 4.

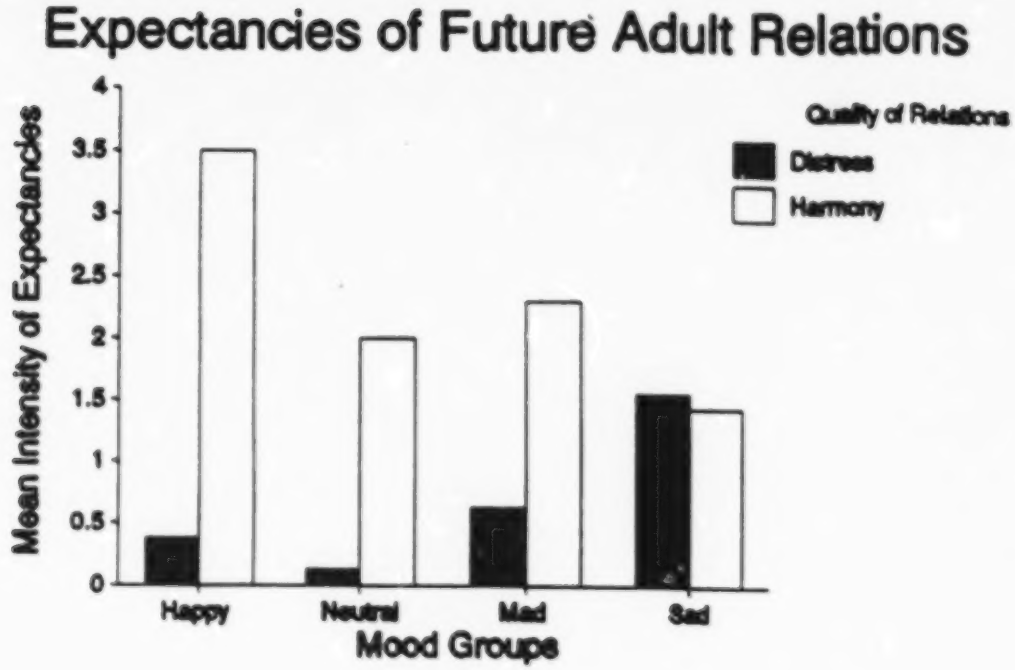

Figure 5.